

## Well-being and Depression in Elderly: An Interplay of Sense of Coherence and Social Support

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### Abstract

Old age is the time when people reflect over their deeds and thus assess the fruitfulness of their lives. A successful adaptation with life leads to a peaceful and content old age while previous disappointments might result in mood swings and depression which might pose a threat for health. Thus a major challenge these days is to identify the factors that maintain and improve the psychological well-being and lead to healthy ageing. Sense of coherence and social support are two such factors that ensure one is resourceful enough to meet the demands presented by the environmental stimuli and can cope up with their negative effects. The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of sense of coherence and social support on psychological well-being as well as depression in the elderly. A sample of 76 elderly people of age 65 and above was taken to study the same. The results indicated that both, sense of coherence and social support, were related positively to psychological well-being and negatively to depression. Also, while sense of coherence significantly predicted depression, social support significantly predicted both, psychological well-being and depression. Thus it can be suggested that providing social support and inculcating sense of coherence in the elderly can help them defeat isolation and find contentment in their lives.

**Keywords:** *Old age, Sense of coherence, Social support, Well-being, Depression, Ageing.*

### Introduction

With a hassled lifestyle these days, people need a coping mechanism which would help them to stay stress-free. Sense of coherence is one such attribute which helps people in dealing with mental strain. Irrespective of its popularity in health furtherance and many studies acknowledging sense of coherence (SOC) as helping people cope better and in turn resulting in better quality of life, relationships between these concepts and their implications are not clearly comprehended and applied by mental health care professionals. Old age is the time when one reflects on the deeds of one's life.

Aaron Antonovsky's concept of sense of coherence justifies why some people can handle stress better than others without letting it harm one's health (Antonovsky,1988). It emerged from the salutogenic approach, i.e., the search for the sources of health rather than those of disease. Since then, sense of coherence has gained far-flung attention and has also been connected to health conditions and outcomes in umpteen studies. Antonovsky envisioned sense of coherence as

a universal concept that determines the degree to which one has an imperishable yet dynamic spirit of certainty that the stimuli that one is going to encounter in the environment will be organized, foreseeable and comprehensible; one is resourceful enough to meet the demands presented by these stimuli; and the demands presented by these stimuli are hindrances, deserving one's diligence and engrossing. The sense of coherence is a conjectural conceptualization that provides a basic thought about the function of stress in human operating. Apart from the particular stress factors that one might encounter in life, and one's perception and reaction to those events, what ascertains whether stress will lead to harm is whether or not will the stress will violate the sense of coherence.

A successful adaptation with life leads to a peaceful old age while previous disappointments might result in mood swings and depression. Thus a major challenge facing mental health professionals is effectively highlighting the conditions that maintain and/or improve quality of life in old age. It is also very important to note that many researches that have been conducted on the association between sense of coherence and well being until now have mostly been done on people younger than 65 years old.

### **Social Support**

Social support refers to the notion that one is understood and assisted by, and is a part of an integrated social network. Social support is believed to be present when a person's resources to deal with a situation are enhanced and aided by a social group which the individual believes himself to be a part of. The support provided maybe monetary, emotional or social in nature. Barnes (1954) was the first to identify and explain interpersonal relationships that operate beyond families or work groups but played a significant role in one's life. Cassel (1976) discovered the link between social support and health. He stated that social support worked as a protective factor against people's exposure to stress and promotes better physical and mental health. Social support has been found to be positively correlated to sense of coherence in many studies because when one gets enough support from the surroundings, the confidence to deal with stressful situations increases and things seem to be manageable, thus increasing the sense of coherence.

### **Well-Being**

Human beings have always striven for a good life but what makes life good is their own positive perception and beliefs about life. The positive evaluation of life leads to the feeling of contentment and joy and is referred to as well-being. The state of well-being not only means an excess of positive emotions but also lower negative moods. This however does not mean that positive and negative affects are mere opposites of each other and combinely predict the well-being of an individual rather positive and negative affects need to be studied separately in order to assess an individual's well-being as a decrease in negative emotions would not necessarily lead to a corresponding increase in the positive emotions. People are now rising beyond economic affluence and need something more

than money to further enhance their quality of life. There are different factors that determine a person's well-being in different contexts. In individualistic cultures, high self-regard and satisfaction with life are the common determinants of well-being whereas in the collectivist cultures, well-being is more affected by the views of others (Feldt, 1997).

### **Depression**

Depression is a state of constant low emotions and negativity accompanied with feelings of sadness, worthlessness and hopelessness. It is different from being sad as it is a more prominent, pervasive and prolonged state. Depression tends to overpower a person's resources and may even lead to suicidal tendencies. However, there have been instances where people have fought depression and stood strong. This bouncing back or resilience can be credited to various factors including sense of coherence. Having a strong sense of coherence may protect a person from depression and may be useful in psychological intervention programs. A high sense of coherence is believed to improve one's contentment and is also related to decreased weariness, forlornness, and anxiety. Researches have provided evidence that sense of coherence and social support equips a person to overcome adversities in life and prevent a person from depression by acting as a coping mechanism which enables a person to deal with the overpowering situations and become resilient.

With an increased curiosity towards revealing the conditions and factors leading to a content life and optimum mental health, several psychological researches have shown that mental health can be affected by factors such as sense of coherence and social support.

Some of the prominent studies have shown that a low sense of coherence is associated with reduced musculoskeletal pain, particularly in neck, shoulder, and lower back, and can also predict the response to pain management programs for chronic pain sufferers and, in some studies, cancer patients. Sense of coherence has also been found to predict the outcome of lower back surgery, probably by altering the way individuals deal with pain. Low level of sense of coherence has been related to greater pain levels as well as greater difficulty in everyday functioning and general health in many studies. Ample studies have supported the positive relation between sense of coherence and determinants of mental health like hope, robustness, locus of control, self esteem and self efficacy, and social skills. Sense of coherence is strongly and inversely related to the factors which negatively affect mental health such as anxiety, anger, burnout, hopelessness, depression, stress and depression (Bothmer von M, Fridlund B., 2003), (Eriksson M., 2000), (Skirka N., 2000), (Lundberg, O., Peck, M.N., 1994).

Since the perceived degree of control and the extent to which things seem predictable and manageable affects the extent of satisfaction with and the quality of one's life, sense of coherence and well-being are interconnected concepts. A study conducted on Lithuanian students revealed that there was a significant negative correlation between sense of coherence and low psychological well-being which indicates that higher sense of coherence would imply higher levels of well-being (Dirzyte, A., Patapas, A. & Limantaitė, E., 2003).

A study conducted to assess the proneness to depression and sense of coherence among Arab and Jewish students stated that sense of coherence can act as a protective factor against depression (Sarah A, Beatriz P., 2012).

In a research conducted to study the intensification of anxiety, depression and personal resources among women in their operative period in two stages: on the day preceding the surgery and on the third day after the surgery, the results indicated that the level of depression and state of anxiety decreased with an increase in the level of the sense of coherence. In addition, statistical analysis confirmed a positive correlation between the level of the sense of coherence and the level of optimism in the group of the women in the study before the surgery and after surgery (Lewicka, M., Studzińska, M., Sulima M., Wiktor, H. 2014).

A study aimed at, exploring the links between depression, integrity, and hope in the elderly consisting of a sample of 35 elderly patients revealed that patients with no depression displayed a greater sense of coherence; higher levels of hope; enhanced personal spirit; and greater risk taking than the patients with depression. (Chimich W, Nekolaichuk C., 2004).

Results from studies on Finnish, (Suominen, S., Blomberg, H., Helenius, H., et al, 2001); Swedish, (Nilsson, B., Holmgren, L., Westman, G., 2000); English, (Surtees, P., Wainwright, N., Luben, R., et al, 2003); Canadian populations (Hood, S.C., Beaudet, M.P., Catlin, G. 1996), (Stephens, T., Dulberg, C., Joubert, N., 1999), (Forbes, D.A., 2001), (Ibrahim, S., Scott, F.E., Cole, D.C., 2001); French, (Gana, K., 2001) students, (Bothmer von, M., Fridlund, B., 2003), employees, (Albertsen, K., Nielsen, M.L., Borg, V., 2001) (Söderfeldt, M., Söderfeldt, B., Ohlson, C.G. et al, 2000); health social workers, (Gilbar, O., 1998); patients with rheumatic diseases (Büchi, S., Sensky, T., Allard, S., et al, 1998) (Matsuura, E., Ohta, A., Kanegae, F., et al, 2003); or depressive disorder (Carstens, J.A., Spangenberg, J.J., 1997); immigrants (Sundquist, J., Bayard Bufield, L., Johansson, L.M. et al, 2000); suggest a direct or an indirect relation among perceived sound health and a strong sense of coherence; the higher the sense of coherence, the lower the subjective complaints and symptoms of illness.

Considering students to be a vulnerable group to depression, a study was conducted to study Depression and its relation with Self-esteem and Social Support among 1200 Iranian University Students. The result indicated that there was a significant negative relation between levels of depression and social support. (Talaie, A., Fayyazi, B. M. R. & Ardani, R.A., 2009).

To explore the relationship between personality, social support, and depression and determine if the relationship between personality and depression varies by level of social support in older adults, a study was conducted on 108 elderly patients recovering from an episode of major depression in the experimental group and 103 mentally sound elderly people in the comparison group. Findings revealed significant differences between depressed patients and non-depressed control group participants as the patients were found to be low on social support, social interaction and subjective social support as compared to the non-depressed participants. (Oddone, C., Hybels, C., McQuoid, D., Steffens, D. 2011).

The impact of social support on loneliness and depression was examined in studies conducted on elderly (Oni, OO., 2010), general population and those with mental illness (Wang, J., Mann, F., Evans, B., Ma, R., Johnson, S., 2018). The results indicate regardless of the age-group, social support has been inversely related to depression and loneliness.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

A sample of 76 elderly people above the age of 60 was taken for the present study. Only those with their spouses alive and staying in joint family set-up were included in the sample.

**Research Design:** A causal research design was employed

### **Measurement Tools**

Following tools were used to measure different variables:

1. **The Social Support Questionnaire-** A 27 item assessment measure developed by Sarason which seeks to quantitatively measure the degree of social support and the extent to which one finds it satisfactory. The test also has a satisfactory reliability and validity.
2. **Hindi Version of Geriatric Depression Scale- (HGDS)-** It is a 15 item test that is extensively used with the old age population. Developed by S. Gopaljee in 2016, the test has an internal consistency reliability of 0.74
3. **Psychological Well-Being Scale-** Developed by Ryff in 1995, the psychological well-being scale is a 42 item standardized tool to assess the extent of well-being in 6 different dimensions. The internal consistency reliability of the test is satisfactory ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) along with a reasonable factorial validity.
4. **Sense of Coherence Scale-** developed by Antonovsky in 1993, this test assess the extent to which people are capable of resisting negative life situations and staying healthy. It comprises of 29 items that need to be responded on a 7-point likert scale. The scale possess a high reliability with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.7 to 0.95 and has a satisfactory validity.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The statistical analysis included the calculation of basic descriptive statistics, i.e., mean and standard deviation and Pearson's correlation followed by regression analysis.

## Results

**Table 1 : Correlation between sense of coherence, social support, depression and psychological well-being on the basis of the scores obtained**

Variable	Sense of Coherence	Social Support	Depression	Well-being
Sense of Coherence	1			
Social Support	.476*	1		
Depression	-.438*	-.469*	1	
Well-being	.513*	.137	-.633	1

**Table 2 : Regression analysis with sense of coherence and social support as predictor variables and depression as the outcome variable**

Variable	Beta (standardized coefficient)	Significance level
Sense of Coherence	-.277	.017
Social Support	-.337	.004

**Table 3 : Regression analysis with sense of coherence and social support as predictor variables and well-being as the outcome variable**

Variable	Beta (standardized coefficient)	Significance level
Sense of Coherence	.205	.117
Social Support	.270	.040

It was evident from the results that both, sense of coherence and social support are positively related to well-being and negatively related to depression. The results also indicated that both, sense of coherence and social support are predictors of reduced depression and social support significantly predicts well-being also. The results suggest an increase in well-being preceding increased sense of coherence and social support.

## Discussion-

The intent of the present study was to determine the role of sense of coherence and social support on depression and well-being in elderly. The participants were 76 elderly males and females living in joint family setup. The results showed that sense of coherence and social support are positively related to well-being and negatively related to depression. The results also indicated that both, sense of coherence and social support predicted reduced depression and social support significantly predicted well-being also. The results are discussed in detail as follows-

### *Sense of coherence and well-being-*

The results state a significant positive correlation of 0.513 between sense of coherence and well-being which suggests that an increase in sense of coherence is corresponded by an increase in psychological well-being. A strong sense of coherence means that an individual is well equipped with the resistance resources

required to deal with stressors and has a belief that the negative events or situations in life are manageable and can be subdued, thus promoting a better frame of mind indicating an enhanced well-being. Such resourcefulness in old age can help people believe in their ability to manage and cope successfully with the stressors and promote a sense of confidence in them thus improving their well-being. The regression analysis revealed that sense of coherence can successfully predict an increased well-being with a beta coefficient of .205 suggesting that increased belief in oneself and one's resources can lead to a state of balance between the positive and negative situations and events and thus, a content psychological state.

#### *Social support and well-being-*

Satisfactory social relationships have long been considered as important predictors of well-being and are also reported to increase one's satisfaction with life. People, who perceive themselves as having a strong network of caring social relationship, are believed to experience more positive emotional states than negative ones. The belief that one has somebody to rely on increases the sense of contentment and reassurance thus enhancing the psychological well-being. A positive correlation of 0.137 strengthened this explanation. The regression analysis exhibiting a beta coefficient of 0.270 substantiates the relation between social support and well-being thus suggesting that if perceived as loved and supported, the elderly people can have a better feeling about themselves and their importance in the lives of others thereby improving their psychological well-being.

#### *Sense of coherence and depression*

The incidence of depression is strongly associated with the sense of hopelessness, and greatly affects one's coping abilities and resistance resources. How well a person copes with depression depends upon the belief one has on- his abilities to face negative situations; the manageable nature of the stressors or depressing stimuli; and the hope that obstacles could be surmounted and desired results could be achieved. A negative correlation of -0.438, which was significant at .05 level, supports the claims about sense of coherence leading to a decrease in depression. Sense of coherence has also successfully predicted lowered depression with a beta coefficient of -.277 suggesting that the belief in one's coping capacities and the solvable nature of life's problems can lead to reduced risks of depression in the elderly.

#### *Social support and depression*

Getting validation and support helps minimizing the detrimental effects of depression as one is prevented from feeling lonely, worthless and incapable. With perceived social support, people consider themselves equipped with the required ability to cope up with the situation and also to retaliate with resilience. A significant correlation of -.469 and a regression analysis with beta coefficient -.337 support the notion that social support can reduce the chances of getting depressed by inculcating the feelings of being accepted and cared for at that point of life where one is not in the best form of physical and mental functioning thus in turn giving the required resources to battle depression.



The results have also shown a positive correlation between sense of coherence and social support significant at .05 level which suggests that an increase in social support might result in an enhanced sense of coherence and a high sense of coherence may correspond to an increase in the perceived social support

India has always been a land of strong knit relations and the elders of the family have always occupied a respectable status in the family. Old age is the time when the people who have once been the most important part of the family may feel neglected and incapable. The results of the present study indicated that if enough social support is provided, the elderly may feel important and worthy and can combat major challenges in life.

### Conclusion

It can be thus concluded that providing care, acceptance and support and enhancing the sense of coherence in the elderly can help them think, act and feel positively about themselves as well as the environment thereby improving there every day interaction with life and can also prevent them from feeling dispirited, isolated and helpless.

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